

These pioneer tea ladies are not potty after all

By HELEN SHIELD

Starting a tea shop is not everybody's idea of a glamorous time. But Jan O'Connor and Maryanne Shearer, who shrugged off sympathetic looks and threw their life savings into their enterprise, were ready for a challenge.

Their concept, Tea Too, pitched at converting drink, taste and history into a retail experience, has struck a chord with customers and triggered a renaissance in tea retailing.

Since they started almost two years ago, the two of them have doubled the size of their first shop, in Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, opened a smaller shop in Fitzroy Street, St Kilda, and moved into wholesaling. They employ a manager and seven part-time staff, and increased sales 20 per cent in their second year.

Plans to expand to Sydney are on the drawing board, and the two of them are considering opening a shop in Melbourne's central business district.

Originally Ms O'Connor and Ms Shearer were set on opening a homewares shop. However, their enthusiasm waned after they bumped into a large number of rivals on a buying trip overseas.

"We thought, 'we need to go back to our idea of providing a really exciting, fabulous shopping experience,'" Ms Shearer said. "We thought about all the products we'd bought — everything seemed related to the ceremony of drinking and eating."

It was then, Ms O'Connor said, that they hit on tea.

"All the products we'd bought, the increasing level of health consciousness, people

drinking less coffee, exercising, getting into meditation . . . it all made sense," Ms O'Connor said. And they were committed to ensuring their stores, which sell a range of teas, accessories and accoutrements, were welcoming, provided useful information and a sense of the history and romance of tea.

Start-up proved a challenge. Despite their shared 20 years' experience in retail design and buying, the pair had no idea how quickly a business with no trading history consumed money. "Within six months we were just pumping more money in," Ms Shearer said.

"We were told not to expect any massive financial reward within three or four years of starting the business, or you sacrifice the business. So we decided to sacrifice a substantial part of our wage."

"Financially, the business was far more successful than we thought, but also more draining. Tea Too has paid its way, but every single cent has gone back into the business."

However, neither is anticipating the business will replicate the growth levels of the first 18 months in the next. The main aim now is not to get distracted.

"We have been tempted a couple of times to branch out," Ms O'Connor said. "But it can be the downfall of a business. We want to remain focused on our original concept."

Already Tea Too's non-retail business accounts for 18 per cent of sales — 15 per cent from wholesale sales and 3 per cent from mail order. This time next year, Ms Shearer and Ms O'Connor hope wholesale revenue will account for 35 per cent of sales, mail order 5 per cent, and retail 60 per cent.



Jan O'Connor, left, and Maryanne Shearer at their Fitzroy store: Tea a raging success.

Picture: CATHRYN TREMAIN